

Gilbert K. Chesterton's London Letter

A Query About National Honour

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IT is difficult to avoid a sense of amusement on finding Mr. Norman Angell writing a special introduction to the interesting book of Mr. Leo Perla (*What Is National Honour?* New York: The Macmillan Company. \$1.50). For Mr. Leo Perla sets forth a theory of peace which seems, at first sight at any rate, a flat contradiction of the theory of peace mostly prominently associated with Mr. Norman Angell.

Mr. Angell is chiefly famous for having written a book to show that nations were unwise in going to war, since war was a financial speculation that would never really pay. For some of us it would be enough to answer that it is always unpardonable, whether or no it is unwise, to go to war as a financial speculation, whether or no it is likely to pay.

Mr. Angell's book was too mild a criticism of the wars that are not worth waging; and was not a criticism at all of the wars that are worth waging. But Mr. Perla's book might very well be regarded as a sharply antagonistic criticism of Mr. Angell's book. Mr. Perla's book is entirely founded on the idea that most wars are *not* fought for material interest; and therefore the enlightenment of that interest is no guarantee against wars.

Are Wars Emotional?

It is the whole point of Mr. Perla's pages that wars do not come through a commercial calculation, or any calculation; but through something which he describes, in a rather withering manner, as emotion. They arise especially from a strange emotion called honour; which the writer, one may fairly say, finds not only mystical but mysterious. But whether or no we share his mystification, we can all share his realization; and do justice to the scientific honesty which leads him to see that, as a fact of history, most wars have turned not on a material point of self-interest, but on a moral point of self-respect. It is certainly the most correct conception in his book; possibly the only correct conception in his book. But if his view is correct, the view of the gentleman who writes his introduction is certainly incorrect.

A primary comment may be made on the misconception of the sentiment of honour among men of this school, which may fairly be described as the Semi-Pacifist school. The fallacy runs through numberless passages condemning private and public combat, classing a battle with a duel, or a duel with a murder. But Mr. Perla has put the blunder in a compact and conspicuous form on the first pages of his book, in a quotation from some professor, which he takes as a sort of motto for it. "To argue that a nation's honour must be defended by

the blood of its citizens, if need be, is quite meaningless, for any nation, though profoundly right in its contention, might be defeated at the hands of a superior force exerted on behalf of an unjust and unrighteous cause. What becomes of national honour then?"

The Essence of Honour.

The answer is that national honour is then vindicated; in the only way in which it can be vindicated. It is of the very essence of honour that it is not lost by failure to defeat the oppressor; but is lost by failure to defy him. This is true even in the case of a duel; and even in the case of a bad duel.

No code was ever so barbaric as to suppose that the man who fell had failed in the matter of redeeming his reputation. Nobody thought that Alexander Hamilton had not behaved like a gentleman; even if Burr had only behaved like a bully. And nobody ever thought that Kosciuszko had lost either his own honour or the honour of Poland, because the Polish rising was suppressed.

Nobody ever supposed that Wolf Tone or Robert Emmet had lost either their own honour or the honour of Ireland, because the rising of '98 was suppressed.

The Spirit of the Right.

A man resisting a wrong is not a sort of materialistic magician who can say that it shall not be forced on him. On the contrary, he is a man who says that it *shall* be forced on him; because he will not assent and therefore assist. In a private case like that of Burr and Hamilton it is precisely the dead man whose dignity is secure; it was the living man whose dignity, for other reasons, was doubtful. In a public case like that of the patriots of Ireland and Poland, it is the defeated nations that have become sacred; nor will civilization have saved its soul alive until the hope of Kosciuszko is realized and the epitaph of Emmet written.

Indeed the fact that seems to escape most writers of this school, is the fact that all they write about war is equally applicable to revolution. There is always the same difficulty of defining at what point human dignity is intolerably insulted; at what point corporate indignation is a reaction of common sense. They would not in any case, indeed, be particularly sympathetic with the corporate indignation, or even with the common sense. It is really the whole point of their intellectualism to say that sense is never common.

Anti-Democrats All.

The primary point that strikes me about all these extreme apostles of peace is their profound dislike of democracy. They are never so contentedly

contemptuous as when they can refer to something as an emotion of the masses, or part of the psychology of the crowd. In this tone there is complete consistency; even between Mr. Perla who writes the book and Mr. Angell who writes the introduction.

Pacifists always insist that the people cannot think but only feel; that the many headed beast never acts till it has lost all its heads. But in truth, it all fails upon a very simple fact; that the people cannot only think, it can know.

For instance, Mr. Perla has a curious passage about emotions' unification producing "the certainty with which every Frenchman but Rolland regards Germany as the aggressor" and even talks of the "extreme mental vigour" needed to detach oneself from it. Now in fact the French masses showed, not only far more mental vigour, but far more mental clarity, when they saw their homes burned and their brethren butchered and waited with a mind unchanged, than Rolland ever showed when he decamped comfortably to write cloudy essays in Switzerland.

The World Aggressor.

And they did not merely feel, or even think, that Germany was the aggressor; they knew it. They knew it first because they were citizens and knew the facts, and second because they were Frenchmen and knew the Germans.

Such a popular apprehension is not any the less rational because it is rapid. The belief of a democracy in the Far West, that a prairie fire is undesirable, is none the less strictly logical because they act promptly on the premise; even to the extent of hanging the incendiary. It is the curse of all this intellectualist literature that it would merely make the verdict clearer by making it calmer, and calmer by making it slower. It thinks itself clever when it rushes down the road shouting "Combustion!" instead of shouting "Fire!" It thinks itself more rational for giving a botanical catalogue of the vegetation destroyed by the fire. But it is in reality less rational.

Mr. Perla's book is undoubtedly an earnest ethical inquiry into an important subject, and contains many interesting and valuable passages. But it is infected throughout with this fallacy of supposing that mere frigidity in the presence of outrage is the guarantee of a reasonable reply. As a fact, indignation is in itself a much more reasonable reply. And he could not more completely have answered his own case than by his own example, the case of France in this war. For France which is the most rational nation has also been the most rigidly national; and where there was most logic there there was also most loyalty.

G. K. CHESTERTON.

Dinner at Eight

By George Gordon.

Beyond the verge of reason where giant problems play,
And songs long out of season are stored in dust away
Above the idle chatter of those who learn by rote
To say what doesn't matter to those who always quote
From Burns and Keats and Shelley . . .
There lives (my lady tells me) an ogre, short of sight,
Who gives (my lady tells me) a banquet every night
Of butter, bread and jelly, . . .
All salted with the sweat of tiny men and women
Who knew what they would get if they should go in
swimmin'.
Or run away to play with the child across the way. . .
The butter gall and bitter, the bread a whited stone. . .
What fare, my friend, is fitter for those who (wild outs
sown)
Sit down to scrumptious dinners while hardened little
sinners
Are sent to bed alone?

Beyond the verge of reason our sins we must atone;
And I pray (though it be treason) that when I make my
moan,
When words are to be eaten and tiny hands be beaten,
While they are being fed,
I go supperless to bed.

The Last Post

By Robert Graves.

The bugler sent a call of high romance—
"Lights out! Lights out!" to the deserted square.
On the thin, brazen notes he threw a prayer,
"God, if it's this for me next time in France . . .
O spare the phantom bugle as I lie
Dead in the gas and smoke and roar of guns,
Dead in a row with the other broken ones
Lying so stiff and still under the sky,
Jolly young Fusiliers too good to die."

From *Fairies and Fusiliers*. Alfred A. Knopf.

A Flurry in Stocks

By Harold Willard Gleason.

Summer, Sunday and afternoon:
Modern lovers delight to spoon;
But in Zacheus Knox's time,
Sunday spooning was held a crime!
Poor Zacheus, for one short kiss,
Got a sentence which read like this:
"Whereas he, on the Sabbath Day,
Hath behaved in unseemly way,
We impose on the culprit, Knox,
One full day in the public stocks."
(Hands and feet fastened twenty-four hours!
This was surely no bed of flowers!)

Sunday night: and Zacheus sat
Hot with shame 'neath the broad brimmed hat,
Thinking painfully o'er and o'er,
"How can Abigail love me more?
Me, a law breaker! me, Zach Knox,
Who hath been in the public stocks!"

Morning came; but before the sun
Clambered out of the fog banks dun,
Some one stole to the culprit's seat;
Some one slender and sorry-sweet
Sat beside him and stroked his hair,
Saying, "Zacheus, don't thee care!
Just because thou hast had to sit
In the stocks matters not a whit—
Not to me!" Then Zacheus heard
Whispered low, but distinct each word:
"I am too forward, Zach, I trow;
But—it isn't the Sabbath now!"

Requiescat

By Oliver Herford.

Here Wilhelm sleeps. For mercy's sake
Tread softly, friend, lest he should wake.

From *The Laughing Willow*. George H. Doran Company.

At Wipers and Calvary

By Mary Carolyn Davies.

The boy who was first to die
For the cause they are fighting for
Links his arm and walks with the lads
Who are going to die in the war.

He bled in agony
A very long time ago.
Now they greet him comradely,
With eyes that newly know.

They are brothers in arms in the old,
Old war that is never done;
So with him they jest as they march and rest.
In the snow and the mud and the sun.

With the boy who was first to die
In the fight to make men free.
For it matters little where one goes out,
At Wipers or Calvary.

From *Drums in Our Street*. The Macmillan Company.

To My Father

By Max Eastman.

The eastern hill hath scarce unveiled his head,
And the deliberate sky hath but begun
To meditate upon a future sun,
When thou dost rise from thy impatient bed.
Thy morning prayer unto the stars is said.
And not unlike a child, the penance done
Of sleep, thou goest to thy serious fun,
Exuberant—yet with a whisper tread.

And when that lord doth to the world appear,
The jovial sun, he leans on his old hill,
And levels forth to thee a golden smile—
Thee in his garden, where each warming year
Thou toiled with all joy with him, to fill
And flood the soil with summer for a while.

From *Colors of Life*. Alfred A. Knopf.